

Since passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the "deregulation" of cable television, consumers have seen their rates jump an average of 59 percent -- with some areas experiencing even more dramatic increases. The cost of cable modem service remains out of reach for many households, holding constant for years and selectively underserving rural and low-income Americans. The American people are watching the digital divide widen even as the need for access to high-speed networks increases.

The FCC, through this Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, recognizes that new video competition is entering the market, as phone companies (like AT&T and Verizon) begin to roll out television service. The

Commission asks if the telephone companies are slowed or blocked in their expansion by the process of negotiating franchises - the agreements that companies seeking to provide video services sign with local governments that set the terms for building cable television systems.

These franchise agreements guarantee that local governments control rights-of-way and obtain fair rents from the companies that dig them up to lay cable. They guarantee universal build-out of the technology and its advantages to every household in the community, not just affluent neighborhoods. They guarantee public access television (and funding to provide it) as well

as other services  
like low-cost  
broadband for our  
schools and  
libraries.

Though the  
franchising process  
has not been  
perfect, it has been  
a critical safeguard  
to protect the  
interests of  
consumers and  
citizens in our  
local communities.  
Now that the phone  
companies are  
building television  
systems, local  
communities are  
hungry for new  
competition that  
could drive down  
costs, increase  
options, provide  
access to local  
content and bring us  
closer to bridging  
the digital divide.

Does the franchising  
process need reform?

Perhaps. However,  
the most important  
issue is not how to  
ensure the process  
is changed to suit

the interests of  
telephone companies.  
Instead, the most  
important issue is  
how to ensure that  
the rights and  
services of local  
communities are  
protected and  
enriched. We should  
start with these  
desired outcomes and  
work backward to see  
if the process to  
deliver them can be  
improved. Local  
governments  
undoubtedly will -  
and must - play a  
key role in any  
future franchising  
process.

As new franchising  
rules are  
considered, a number  
of market realities  
must be taken into  
account. There is a  
distinct lack of  
independent  
programming,  
particularly local  
independent  
programming, on  
cable systems. This  
is largely the  
result of vertical  
and horizontal

consolidation among the largest media companies and cable providers. We are required to buy channels we don't want or need because the cable operators bundle them together. The quality of customer service often reflects the fact that cable television is not a competitive market. The mere presence of satellite providers does not drive down rates nor present an affordable alternative for broadband access.

In many communities, the only truly independent sources of local news, information and culture come from the public channels produced at community media centers. They are the only way many citizens see local government in action and often the only way residents get

information about events happening close to home. Some towns have been able to negotiate for funding to enhance and expand these resources. Others have obtained wired schools and libraries, resources for e-medicine, government efficiency programs and other educational initiatives. All use their negotiating power to ensure the entire community is served.

The risk of supplying "one size fits all" franchises to new providers is the elimination of these and other valuable services that fulfill important public policy aims. There is surely a need for new providers of broadband and video content to enter existing markets, be they private or public.

However, no matter the level at which 'franchises' to new providers are granted - be it local, state, or national - local communities cannot be cut out of the process. They must be allowed to lend their voice to how new video and broadband systems will be implemented and what features will be available to meet future needs.

Though this may be a form letter, I'm quite versed in Public Access Media and support everything it says. Like most working folks in this country, I just don't have the time to sit down and pour out my strongly held beliefs into something you're just going to throw in the trash. So, THANKS for reading the first couple sentences and moving

on! I have this  
sinking feeling  
Democracy doesn't  
work for the poor.